



# Rhythm Bones Player

A Newsletter of the Rhythm Bones Society

Volume 4, No. 2 2002

In this Issue  
Mel Mercier

All-Ireland Bones  
Playing Competition

Rhythm Bones Chat  
Rom

NEFFA Bones  
Workshop  
Report

Mel Mercier  
Bodhran and Bones  
Video Reviewed

Columns:  
**Executive Director's**  
Column

Editorial

Letters to the  
Editor

Tips and Techniques  
Column

Bones Websites

Bones Recordings

Bones Calendar

Future Issues  
Brother Bones

## Executive Director's Column

BONES FEST VI plans are receiving the final touch. The Fest will take place August 2-4 on the Guilford College campus in Greensboro, NC. See <[www.guilford.edu/](http://www.guilford.edu/)> for a virtual campus tour. The college is located on the corner of Friendly and New Garden Roads. Overnight accommodations will be available to us at approximately \$50 per night for singles, \$40 for doubles and \$30 for seniors. This cost includes 3 meals per day in the cafeteria in Founders Hall. You can reserve your accommodations on the Guilford website or regular mail. Details on the enclosed form.

Call the Greensboro Visitors Bureau at 800-344-2282 and visit <[www.greensboro.org](http://www.greensboro.org/)> for excellent information about our city.

Your Board of Directors will meet on the afternoon of August 2 at 1:00 pm. You are all invited to this very important meeting.

On Friday night, August 2, we will have

member registration and a reception in the Boren Lounge in Foundation Hall from 6:30 pm to 11:00 pm. Heavy hors d'oeuvres, wine and beer will be served throughout the evening. An opportunity to get to know other bones players.

Bones demonstrations and semi-formal introductions will commence on Saturday, August 3, at 10:00 am in the Jos. Bryan Jr. Auditorium (located in the new Frank Family Science Center). A brief business meeting will follow this full day of demonstrations.

A banquet, without speeches, will be held Saturday evening, August 3, from 6:00-8:00 pm in Founders Hall. Immediately following the banquet we will have a public performance in the Jos. Bryan Jr. Auditorium. The make-up of this event will be determined during the Saturday sessions. You may be part of it if you so desire.

On Sunday, August 4, we plan to meet at 8:00 am in the cafeteria in Founders Hall for a long good-by breakfast. May your bones be with you.

## Mel Mercier

Mel Mercier is a special friend to the RBS, and, as one of the best bones players in the world, it is an honor to have him as a member of the Society and on our Board of Directors. He is a performer, teacher, composer, arranger, producer and student.

Mel's legacy is through his father, Peadar, who was part of the seminal Irish group, Ceoltoiri Cualann, organized by Sean O Riada who some credit as starting the modern era of bodhrán and bones playing. Some of the Ceoltoiri Cualann musicians, including Peadar, went on to form the now famous Chieftains.

Here is what Mel says about his early bones playing days. "Something in me always hesitates for a moment (in disbelief) when it hears me saying that I have been playing the bones for about thirty years now! I don't know exactly when I began to play but it was certainly in my early 'teens if not before. My earliest bones-playing recollection sees me sitting in the bathroom of our house in

*(Continued on page 5)*



Mel Mercier from Rhythm Bones Society's Founding Members Group Photograph at Bones Fest III

## Editorial

The newsletter is expanding to six pages, and if members continue to contribute, such as Steve Brown in this issue, eight pages may be needed.

The feature article is on member Mel Mercier. Mel is also a member of your Board of Directors, and helps guide the Society in the right direction. Being from Ireland and performing around the world, he gives us an all important international perspective.

Steve Brown has two reports. The first is his bones workshop at the recent NEFFA event. The other is an announcement of his Rhythm Bones Chat Group hosted by Yahoo on the Internet. I had hoped that Letters to the Editor would be a way for members to exchange ideas, but this is only somewhat successful. The Rhythm Bones Chat Group is the modern way to do it. Sign up and give it a try. I did.

I recently sent email to members and non-members asking for items for an expanded Bones Calendar, and this issue sees a modest increase in the Calendar. You are encouraged to submit events where you play the bones.

I played at a couple of events that I now would put in the Calendar, a Coffeehouse for a local church and a

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Rhythm Bones Society,

Our committee is delighted to have made contact with you and hope maybe we could compete in each other's festivals in the future. This is our last year calling ours The All-Ireland Bone-Playing competition as we would hope to make it an International event. We would like to see our Bone-Playing Competition have a broad set of rules and regulations which would cover both of our countries and perhaps Canada which I believe has pockets of bone-players also. We would greatly appreciate any thoughts or ideas you might have regarding your bone players coming to Ireland to compete or vice versa. Perhaps you could send us a regular copy of your Rhythm

Bones" Newsletter and we will keep you informed of the happenings in Abbeyfeale. The town has a very strong traditional music, song and dance background and our festival each Bank Holiday Weekend in May attracted the cream of talent in the country. This is our eleventh traditional festival in the town and each one seems to get bigger and better. Pat Sport Murphy's son Jack told me he is recording this year's festival for you and he also has the last three or four Bone-Playing competitions recorded so we will try and send them to you and your members. *Dan Murphy*, Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick, Ireland

Subject: Vivian Cox Story  
Hiya Steve,

Yes indeed you have found another female bones player and I have played for eleven years or so now. My teacher was another female bones player, the mighty Monica Sullivan. In fact here in Sligo (Ireland) I know another three female bone players which is very healthy for the tradition.

I play bones at every concert and try to have them on every album. They are featured a few times on the *Live in Palma* album. Now I'm going to rest my weary bones. All the best. *Cathy Jordan* (Cathy sings vocals and plays

## Bones Calendar

**May 11, 2002.** Aaron Plunkett plays bones and drums for a benefit concert of Anlo Ewe music from Ghana Africa. 818-569-5465

**June 6-9, 2002.** Sea Music Festival. The featured musicians are Martin Carthy, Finest Kind, The Ancient Mariner Chanteymen, The Barrouallie Whalers, and Deb Cowan. Many other musicians will also perform including myself and Tim Reilly. There will be lots of bones playing. The festival includes concerts each of the four evenings and a full schedule of activities all day on Saturday and Sunday. The phone number for information and tickets is 860-572-5315. *Bonnie Dixon*

**June 16-22, 2002.** Gaelic Roots, Boston College. Mel Mercier and Tommy Hayes lead workshops on June 17th. See [www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/irish/gr.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/irish/gr.html) for details.

## *Rhythm Bones Player*

Rhythm Bones Society  
Volume 4, No. 2  
Second Quarter 2002

Editor  
Steve Wixson  
wixson@chattanooga.net

Executive Director  
Everett Cowett  
evcow@aol.com

Web Site Coordinator  
Martha Cowett  
mccowett@mindspring.com

Board of Directors  
Steve Brown  
Sally Carroll  
Everett Cowett, Executive Director  
Mel Mercier  
Jerry Mescher  
Russ Myers, Assistant Director  
Steve Wixson, Secretary/Treasurer

The Rhythm Bones Player is published quarterly by the Rhythm Bones Society. Nonmember subscriptions are \$10 for one year; RBS members receive the Player as part of their dues.

The Rhythm Bones Player welcomes letters to the Editor and articles on any aspect of bones playing. All material submitted for consideration is subject to editing and condensation.

Rhythm Bones Central web site: [rhythmbones.com](http://rhythmbones.com)

**June 21, 22, 23, 2002.** The California Traditional Music Society will be presenting their 20th Annual Summer Solstice Music, Dance and Storytelling Festival at SOKA University in Calabasas, CA. Among many other things going on that weekend, I will be co-teaching (with Molly Bennett) a bones workshop on Saturday and I will be teaching (solo) another bones workshop on Sunday. For much more information about CTMS and the festival, visit: [www.ctms-folkmusic.org/festival/index.html](http://www.ctms-folkmusic.org/festival/index.html).  
*Michael Ballard*

**August 2-4, 2002.** Bones Fest VI, Greensboro, NC, Ev Cowett host. Details and Registration Form in this newsletter.

**August 31, 2002.** 27th Annual Bones and Spoons Contest at Avoca, IA. Contact Board Member Jerry Mescher (712-658-2211)

**Gemini Concerts.** Here is the Gemini concert schedule. I play the bones in all

(Continued on page 3)

(Calendar—Continued from page 2)

of these shows. Refer to our website [www.geminichildrensmusic.com](http://www.geminichildrensmusic.com) for details. *Sandor Slomovits*

**May 18**, Lansing, MI, 517-319-6804 or [www.elartfest.com](http://www.elartfest.com)

**June 1**, Flint, MI, 810-232-0145

**June 9**, Southfield Philharmonic Southfield, MI, 248-569-9420 [www.cityofsouthfield.org](http://www.cityofsouthfield.org)

**June 20**, Applewood/Ruth Mott Foundation, Flint, MI, 810-233-3031

**June 28**, Holland, MI, 616-396-3278

**June 28**, Fremont, MI, 231-928-3455

**July 9**, Huntington Woods, MI, 248-541-3030

**July 11**, St. Ignace, MI, 800-338-6660

**July 12**, Harbor Springs, MI, 231-526-2815

## Rhythm Bones Yahoo Chat Group

One of the best things for me at Bones Fest is the opportunity to talk to other bones players. Hearing how people got started, what material their bones are made from, stories of where they've played and just about anything about bones they want to talk about. When I came back from bones Fest IV I got an idea, what about starting a bones discussion group on the Yahoo Groups site? They have many percussion groups and 3 or 4 on the Bodhran alone, but none for the bones. *Rhythm Bones: The most Ancient of Instruments* was born.

Yahoo Groups is a place where people can go to discuss any topic they like as long as they stay within the parameters of good taste and civility. At the Rhythm Bones group topic's have ranged from the Minstrel Show, to playing styles, telling your own personal bones story, to discussing bones players on recordings. It's quite simple to join, simply follow the instructions at [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) located in the groups section. Initially few people joined, and the site saw little traffic. Now with many new members, we stand at 20 members and counting. So if the urge hits you to have a little contact with your fellow bones players in the context of a discussion, drop in and start posting those messages. We'd love to hear from you! *Steve*

## All-Ireland Bones Playing Competition

The All-Ireland Bones Playing Competition is one of the highlights of the "Fleadh by the Feale" festival in Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick. The fest is held every year on the first week-end of May and this will be its 8th year. The bones playing competition is held on Monday evening.

The competition is open air and a crowd of around a thousand people attend. Generally there would be anything up to twenty entrants and it's growing every year. One can hear a pin drop when each competitor takes the stage. Sizeable cash prizes are up for grabs for those who win 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. Also there is an under-age competition for those young enthusiastic bone players.

Abbeyfeale has always had a bone playing tradition mainly due to one local man, Pat 'Sport' Murphy, a man of up to seventy years, but boy can he play those bones (see RBP, Vol 2, No 3 for a story on Sport). Donal Murphy, son of Dan Murphy, one of the organizers, says "I've been involved in traditional music all my life as an accordion player and have recorded with lots of people in Ireland, but I have to say I've never met anyone with the same understanding and ornamentation as Sport Murphy. I am very fortunate to have played for Sport on each occasion that he has played in the competition." Sport, by the way, has never been beaten, and he is back to defend the title this year. Winners of the event are not allowed to compete in the following year's competition.

Norma Prendiville wrote an Internet story about last year's event ([www.limerick-leader.ie/issues/20010512/news09.html](http://www.limerick-leader.ie/issues/20010512/news09.html)). In it she wrote that the tradition of bones playing has been given a new lease on life in Abbeyfeale where it has flourished and become an integral part of the annual event. The event organizers, inspired by Sport Murphy, decided to re-introduce what had become a dying tradition and

inaugurated a national bones playing competition.

"We were struggling with it for a while," said Dan Murphy, "but now we are almost turning them away."

The adjudicator for last year's event was Seamus O'Kane, and he had his work cut out to choose the winners. What does he think makes a good bones player? "A good player can roll the bones. They can get different sounds from the bones. Precise timing is important as well."

But he admitted that the standard among the top four players was "very tight. No one in the top four could have been left out."

He awarded the top honor to Paddy Donovan, with Richie Breen a close second. Brian Hickey and David Murphy took joint third.

Previous winners have included only Sport Murphy and Paddy Donovan. Adjudicators in previous years have included Mel Mercier.

Donal says they allow two-handed bones playing in the event. Maybe someone from the States should compete in the event to give them someone different to compete against. Visiting Ireland, of course, would make it a glorious vacation.

The only other known bones competition is the Spoons and Bones Contest at the National Traditional Country Music Festival in Avoca, Iowa held for the past 27 years in late September. This is a smaller event, but has produced some very good winners.

Maybe a third bones playing contest is needed open to only those who have come in 1st, 2nd or 3rd in either the Abbeyfeale or Avoca events. That winner would be crowned the World Bones Playing Champion. (See Dan's Letter to the Editor for his

## Bones Recordings

**Live in Palma.** An album from the Irish band Dervish with Cathy Jordan playing bones on a few tracks (see her Letter to the Editor.) Dervish CD's are available from their online shop [dervish.ie/acatalog/](http://dervish.ie/acatalog/)

## Old Bones at NEFFA

The New England Folk Festival held 20 miles outside of Boston in Natick, MA brings together an eclectic group of musicians and dancers each year. This year was no exception with the program listing Yiddish and Klezmer music, African string band, and Turkish Village music and workshops in Irish tin whistle, hurdy gurdy, ukulele and accordion.

In addition, though, this year brought together Rhythm Bones players from around New England to perform and teach the bones to all who would partake. With such notables as Elwin 'Shorty' Boulet, 81 years young, Johnny Muisse originally from Nova Scotia and others from Maine to Vermont clicking their way into the hearts of all present.

An audience of more than 100 arrived for the performance section entitled "A Feast of New England Bones" and watched as bones players of various age and experience level displayed their expertise. Accompanied by Dave Reiner on Fiddle and Piano duty split between Ryan Thomson and Cal Howard, the music was excellent and provided just the right mix of styles. Of course Shorty and Johnny are my favorites, but George Barrett shined on *Alabama Jubilee*, Parker Waite displayed his virtuosity on the metal bones, Ken Sweeny on bones and harmonica performed a special duet with Tim Reilly, and Ernie Duffy with his 14 year old protégé' Sky wowed them with Shorty like movements. One of the highlights was Jonathan Danforth and Rob Rudin marching in playing bones in unison and Jon switching to fiddle and using his bones like a bow, much to the delight of the crowd.

All took the stage at the end, played together and individually, and set the scene for the "How to Play the Bones Workshop" which followed. Most of the crowd stayed, and attempted to try their hand at playing the bones. With many converts, the bones proceeded to move into the hallway and the sounds of bones

## Tips and Techniques The Basics

What are the basics of playing any kind of rhythm bones. They are the number of hands used, the number of bones played, the grips, the position of the hands and the sound elements.

The RBS membership survey revealed that 70% of members play two-handed, 23% play one-handed and the rest play both ways. Traditionally the Irish have played one-handed.

The number of bones played in a hand is predominately two. Nick Driver and his father and others can or could play with four bones in each hand and I am fairly certain Brother Bones used four bones in each hand on his famous "Sweet Georgia Brown" recording. It is not too difficult to keep three bones lined up while playing, but keeping four bones lined up takes some practice.

The survey revealed that 65% of members grip the stationary bone between their first and second finger, 10% between their thumb and first finger, and 25% both ways. These numbers pertain to two bones in a hand, and the moving bone is gripped between the middle and ring finger. If four bones are used, the stationary bone is gripped between the thumb and first finger. If three bones are play, either way of gripping the stationary bone will work.

Most players hold the bones so they are almost vertical. The actual position of the hands relative to the body varies from being in front of the chest to hands stretched wide away from the body. The major exception are students of Dr. Fred Edmund's technique and who holds their hands such that the bones approach horizontal with the ground. This technique is based on the *tap* or single sound element, and the horizontal position allows gravity to pull the bones apart more quickly in preparation for the next beat.

The natural sound elements produced by the bones are the *tap*, *triplet* and *roll*. The sound is produced by a combination of wrist and arm motion with the wrist motion

similar to throwing a curve with a baseball. The *tap* is a single sound with outward arm and wrist movement only. The *triplet* is a series of three sounds with outward movement followed by an inward return to the starting position. The *roll* is a continuous series of triplets with continuous outward and inward arm and wrist movements. Loudness is controlled by the strength of the arm and wrist movement. Loudness can be reduced by intentionally misaligning the bones so they strike together on their edges.

Music is played using various combination of these basic elements plus silence. If playing with two hands, the same combinations can be played by both hands or difference combinations can be played in each hand. The latter requires more practice and skill.

A *tap* can be produced with the ring finger and no motion of the arm and wrist. Jerry Mescher plays what he calls a *two-beat* which is a *triplet* without the middle sound played with no arm movement and extra control with the ring finger. A *quadruplet* can be played with exaggerated arm movement while playing a *triplet*. Most bones players create a *quadruplet* by following a *triplet* with a *tap*.

Any multiple sound element can be created with fast *taps* either in one hand or two as with the Edmund technique. However, a *triplet* or *roll* created with taps can not be played as fast as a natural *triplet* or *roll*.

As a bones player's skill increases, forces created by exaggerated arm and wrist motions in space add nuances to the sounds produced. For these players, the use of the ring finger to control the moving bone increases.

Pitch change as demonstrated by Russ Myers and Aaron Plunkett could be considered a basic element, but let's leave that to another day.

Do you have other elements that you consider basic—that more complicated rhythm patterns can be build upon them. If so, send me a description and I will include in the next newsletter. *Steve Wixson*

# Review of Mel Mercier's Bodhrán and Bones Video

This instructional video contains instruction for both bodhrán and bones. A bones player might think this is a waste of video tape; however, for those interested in Irish music, the percussion insights provided in the bodhrán instruction applied directly to bones playing.

The bones instruction is at the end of the video and lasts 14 minutes. It consists of instruction followed by a very good demonstration with music.

Following a brief bones solo, the instruction begins with a description of bones and the different materials they are made from. Mel's favorite is an unusual combination of a cow rib and a black plastic bone (made by RBS member Joe Birl). He next shows how to grip the bones using both the thumb and first finger and first and second fingers styles. Mel uses the traditional Irish one-handed style of bones playing.

The actual instruction begins with the roll and he uses slow motion so the student can see what is happening. He notes the triplet nature of the beat lends itself to jig rhythms. After the roll motion is mastered, he moves on to how to control it with an exercise to start and stop cleanly. He shows variations using single beats before and after the triplet rolls. He concludes by playing a Jig-Reel with Seamus Eagan on the flute.

During a recent visit to Boulder, Colorado, I wondered into a jam session at a local Irish Pub. They welcomed me and my bones into the session as they were learning how to play the bones. They had Mel's video and were enthusiastically trying to master 'backbeats' on the bones as adapted from the bodhrán section of the video. I do not play bones in any traditional style, and they convinced me to get his video and learn some traditional Irish bones playing techniques.

To those of us who know Mel, he is a delightful person, and this comes across on the video. The video was produced by Interworld Music, is distributed

*(Mel Mercier—Continued from page 1)*

Blackrock in Dublin in the early 1970's playing along to the Chieftains as they rehearsed in our front room. With the bathroom door slightly ajar I could take advantage of the bright tile-acoustic while not disturbing the musicians as they played.

"In another early memory, again in the early 1970's, I am standing behind the curtain on the stage of a local convent waiting to be introduced by my father who was playing in a charity event with his Chieftain's colleague, flute player Michael Tubridy. I was about to make my stage debut playing both bodhrán and bones and I can still just remember the introduction of a 'special guest' and my pushing through the curtain to enter the stage to the warm applause of the audience.

"I learnt to play the bones and bodhrán from my father but I have little or no memory of the process. I do recall my own eagerness to play and I seem to remember my father responding to this with on-going, but informal, gentle coaching and encouragement. At that time I considered the bodhrán to be the essential traditional Irish rhythm instrument, with the bones sometimes in a secondary role."

Over the years bones have become more important to Mel and bodhrán and bones player Tommy Hayes calls him the greatest bones player alive.

Mel is one of Ireland's most important percussionists and teachers of Irish and world music. His interests stem from his own performance on bodhrán and bones but extend to Ghanaian drumming and the gamelan traditions of Java. In 1990 he went to study with the percussionist John Bergamo at the California Institute of the Arts where he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in World Music.

His other academic achievements include a Bachelor's Degree from University College Cork, a Fulbright scholarship and an American Foundation for Contemporary Arts research grant, and he was a visiting scholar and assistant professor of music at Connecticut's Wesleyan University in 1998-1999. At Wesleyan he taught Irish music, and studied gamelan, Karnatak voice and

percussion, and ethnomusicological theory.

Some of his most impressive bones playing is with pianist Mícheál O'Súilleabháin. Mícheál and Mel have been collaborating off and on for over 25 years. Mícheál's 1987 CD 'The Dolphin's Way' charted a new relationship for the two which has resulted in Mel guesting on almost all of Mícheál's CDs to date. Their shared composition 'Music Be More Crispy' is already a classic in Irish tradition through its use of Indian, Western Classical, Jazz and Irish Traditional music.

Mícheál and Mel recently completed a tour that marked their first duo partnership since their landmark recording and allowed audiences a rare opportunity to eavesdrop on the ongoing musical conversation between these highly individual performers and composers. Their tour included new compositions by both musicians for piano and percussion as well as some of the many classic tracks.

Mel performed on stage in Riverdance and John Cage's Roaratorio, with singers Mary Black and Áine Uí Cheallaigh, and keyboardist/composer Bill Whelan.

It was while Mel was in Connecticut that he met Ev Cowett, Russ Myers and several other American bones players. Mel attended Bones Fests III and IV, became a Founding member of the Rhythm Bones Society and was elected to its Board of Directors. The Society has had some influence on Mel as he, during the previously mentioned tour, performed in public for the first time playing bones with both hands.

An interesting story came out of Bones Fest III. As Mel introduced himself to the other bones players, he

## Bones Websites

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rhythmbones/>. Steve Brown's Rhythm Bones Chat Group.  
[scripts.ireland.com/dublin/find/continuereview.cfm?eventid=5400&category=music](http://scripts.ireland.com/dublin/find/continuereview.cfm?eventid=5400&category=music). A review of pianist Michael O'Suilleabhain and RBS member Mel Mercier 12 day performance tour. This was Mel's first public performance playing two-handed bones.

*(Mel Mercier—Continued from page 5)*

mentioned that his favorite bones were a combination of a real bone and a black plastic bone made in the States. Unfortunately, he had broken all his plastic bones, and

*(continued on Page 6)*

could not find a replacement.

Unbeknown to Mel the maker of those bones was sitting not five feet away, and before the day was over, Mel had several pairs of Joe Birl's patented bones to take home.

Mel is a lecturer in Music at University College Cork where he teaches courses in Irish, Indian, West African and Javanese music, and directs the UCC Javanese Gamelan. He regularly composes for contemporary dance and theatre. He has just completed the music for a new production (*The Powerbook*) at the National Theatre in London and a previous Abbey Theatre production of *Medea*, will travel to six US cities in the Fall.

Bodhrán and bones have taken him around the world. One recent trip was a week to Ankara and Istanbul with a Turkish singer and percussionists from Turkey,

Bulgaria, Italy, Portugal and Germany.

As a student, Mel is working toward a PhD and his thesis is on the Bones. We look forward to reading his thesis and learning more about our instrument. He has interviewed many of the best bones players in the world as part of his bones research.

When asked where bones fit into today, "All I can say now is that bones playing is a celebration of life!"

Buy one of these two CD's with Micheál O'Suilleabháin on piano and



Photograph of Mel Mercier playing bones at Bones Fest III

Mark your calendar

**Bones Fest VI**

Guilford College

Greensboro, North Carolina

August 2, 3 & 4, 2002

Everett Cowett, Host  
evcow@aol.com

## *Rhythm Bones Society*

1060 Lower Brow Road  
Signal Mountain, TN 37377-2910

*Address Correction Requested*